# Wally Hedrick

## THE BOX

The first and most monumental of numerous black monochromes featured in this timely and well-edited survey of works by Wally Hedrick, who died in 2003 at the age of seventy-five, is *War Room*, 1967–68/2002, a massive volume enclosed on four sides by eight huge, vertical canvases bolted together. The backs of the paintings' stretchers face outward so that the work resembles a theater set, and a door inserted in one of the canvases allows viewers to step inside the tomblike vault of a space. The tarlike oil surfaces of Hedrick's paintings are heavy—in multiple senses of the word: They are visually weighty, dense, slow; they signify death.

**Wally Hedrick, *War Room*, 1967–68/2002**, oil on canvas, eight panels, each 11' x 5' 6".

Hedrick's willingness and stated desire to have the paintings signify in this way—explicitly indicated in his titles, which frequently refer to specific wars or political figures—suggest that these monochromes are not "pure" in the teleological sense of the modernist project; rather, the accumulated black surfaces cover over and negate existing images. The environmental, confrontational *War Room* was augmented by several related black monochrome paintings from a span of years including *III Vietnam Series*, 1957; *Rhondo*, 1970/1992/2002; and *Black Bush Burning*, 2002, a small, tough canvas that addresses the current president. The last of these looks as if it belongs to Hedrick's earlier "Vietnam Series," 1957–73, suggesting unavoidable parallels between two disastrous American wars. Despite their variety of formats, the paintings maintain their solemnity; unlike so much political art, the black monochromes seem to acknowledge the inability of art to change the world. But in their negation, the paintings register their protest.

If Hedrick seems an obscure figure today, it is perhaps due to his seeming indifference to the art world. In 1967–68, when he made *War Room*, he was featured in Dorothy Miller's important exhibition "Sixteen Americans" at the Museum of Modern Art, alongside then-emerging artists such as Jay DeFeo, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Frank Stella. In an interview shortly before his death, Hedrick cantankerously stated, "My career has never really taken off in the usual sense. I just couldn't take New York seriously. When Jay [DeFeo] and I were in that big show . . . they sent us tickets and said, 'Come to the opening, we'll put you up and show you New York.' I sent a representative. We didn't want to go to New York; we hated the place. We thought it was arrogant. I don't think of this as a profession; I'm a used-car salesman."

Based in San Francisco, Hedrick was more closely aligned with the beat and hippie scenes than with the precincts of "advanced art." His relationship with DeFeo spans the creation of *The Rose*, 1958–66, her heroically scaled and enormously weighty impasto painting. The starburst figure of *The Rose* intimates a kinship with Hedrick's earthy mandala paintings from the period, of which *Love Feel*, 1957, and *Things Are*, 1961, were on view here, along with the rather flat-footed *Burn Me!*, 1990, a funky American flag painting inscribed with the almost-jubilant text of the title that coincides with the culture wars of the first Bush administration. If such a work lacks the potency of the black monochromes, it is because negation is surely a more convincing message for a painting to make in the avalanche of mass media images and semantic manipulation. In an endless moment of political uncertainty and unrest, this survey revealed an artist urgently worthy of reconsideration.

*—Michael Ned Holte*